

#148 C. E. THOMPSON: ASSISTANT FIRE CHIEF AT NAVY YARD

Chris Conybeare (CC): Okay, this is an oral history interview with C. E. "Tommy" Thompson. It's conducted December 2, 1986 at the Sheraton Waikiki, at approximately 11:45 am. Mr. Thompson resides at 2040 . . .

C. E. Thompson (CT): Chilton Drive.

CC: . . . Chilton Drive, Glendale, California. My name is Chris Conybeare, conducting the interview, and assisted by Dan Martinez.

Tommy, what was your name and rank on December 7, 1941?

CT: My name is Claude Earvin Thompson. I go by Tommy Thompson. And I was assistant fire chief in the Navy yard fire department.

CC: And what were you, a noncommissioned officer, or . . . ?

CT: Yeah, noncommissioned officer, what they called us.

CC: Okay. You were assistant fire chief. Now, what exactly was your job when you say assistant fire chief?

CT: Well, we were over thirteen firemen we had in there. And we had a Navy captain that was in charge of our fire depart-- see, we was under the Navy yard. That's why they called us the Navy yard fire department. We was under the fourteenth naval district and they had a [*Rear Admiral*] Furlong with us. He was really in charge of our fire department.

CC: How did you get to Hawaii? How did you get this position here?

CT: Well, I, at first, went in the Marines in 1934, my brother and I, through Paris Island, one of the toughest boot camps in the country. And we went from Paris Island to Quantico, Virginia in the fifth Marines. And they're the only Marine division that wears a fourragere. That's a decoration from World War I. My brother and I both got to wear that. This was in the Fifth Marines at Quantico, Virginia. And we made maneuvers every year down at Culebra, Puerto Rico, every year. And we'd go from there on maneuvers, or we'd go down to Panama. And the last maneuvers we went to New Orleans during the Mardi Gras there, and one of our battleships, the *ARKANSAS*, was the first battleship up the Mississippi River to New Orleans.

And then after our first cruise from '34 to '38, my brother and I, we got out of the service and returned back to Texas and we went in the little small restaurant business there together. And I stayed with him almost a year and I -- he got married, and so I gave him my part of the business then re-enlisted in the Marines in 1939. And that's how come I was over in Pearl Harbor. They sent me right over to Pearl Harbor.

CC: So, in 1939 -- you came in '39.

CT: Yeah, 1939 I came to Pearl Harbor and it was all cane fields around us, all the houses and everything was around that Naval base out there, and that was all cane fields in '39.

CC: A little different in those days.

CT: Yes.

CC: When -- that morning, on December 7, what were you doing? Did you have the duty or were you . . . ?

CT: All right, yes, I was on duty and this Hal Pages. We was the only two firemen up that Sunday morning. And we just got through warming our fire trucks up, oh, about 7:45 when we warmed them up. And after we warmed them up, we got us a chair and went outside, just sitting outside there. And all of a sudden, there we started hearing these -- we heard these planes coming in, two or three minutes, but we never saw them. No, they was coming out of that cloud that covered up the mountains. And then they kept getting louder and louder. And then finally we walked out in the street, then after we stopped in the streets there for a little while, we started seeing them peeling out of the clouds, coming down towards the harbor then. And I saw the first bombs dropped in Pearl Harbor, they was dropping them on all those battleships out there. And I said, "Oh my god, they're dropping flour sacks on our ships out there."

And just about time I said that, here comes some Zee's. I didn't see these Zeroes. They come in from another direction, straight at us, right in the middle of the street. Lucky I didn't get hit there with some of them strafing bullets. So I ran and got on the fire truck and sounded the alarm on the fire truck, and that's something we're not supposed to do. That's the first time it's ever been sounded on a fire truck, because we're supposed to pull the rope and go, "Clang, clang, clang," and they come, the upstairs comes sliding down the fire pole, you know.

CC: Now, when you said -- let me just ask you a question now. You said you thought they were dropping flour sacks. Why would you think something like that?

CT: Well, I thought this was a dummy raid, you know.

CC: So they were doing things like that before this?

CT: Yeah, I thought they was having a dummy raid out there. And then when this plane come over strafing me, I could see the rising sun. They just flew . . . I could've threw a rock and hit the plane, they were so low, just flying right over the buildings.

CC: Do you remember what color the plane was, or . . . ?

CT: Yeah, it was kind of black-looking plane with a rising sun on it. It was a, I guess, a Zero plane, what it was, but I didn't know it was a Zero at that time.

CC: And you could see the pilot in the plane?

CT: Oh yes, yes. Yes. That's how close they were. You could hit him with a rock, if I had a rock.

CC: At that moment, did anything go through your head when you realized this guy was shooting at you?

CT: Just scared the hell out of me, all I know. And my buddy, he's the only one had any common sense, I guess. He took cover. He dove under the grease rack and, boy, you should have seen him, how greasy he was when he came out from under that grease rack. And I was sounding the alarm on the fire truck and I don't know what made me do that, I just did. But we're supposed to sound the alarm on the, in the office, pull a rope and go, "Clang, clang, clang."

In fact, that's how I got credit for sounding the first alarm at the Navy yard there, because it was, oh, it must have been several weeks after Pearl Harbor, I was called in about it. They said, "Why did you sound the alarm on the fire truck."

And I told them, I said, "Well," I told them that we heard these planes several minutes before we ever saw 'em. And then we walked out in the middle of the street and couldn't see, wonder what was going on, and getting louder and louder and louder. And then we finally seen them coming, peeling out of the cloud cover there, down over the harbor then. And then that was a very short interview, that colonel said, "Well, that's all I wanted hear."

That's all he said. I thought I was going to get the court-martial, or something, you know. We're not supposed to sound the alarm on the fire truck.

CC: What happened next? You sound the alarm and what happened?

CT: Well, we . . . it wasn't about two or three minutes later, we got orders from the Fourteenth Naval District to tell us to take all hands down to try to help save that battleship, *PENNSYLVANIA*, all possible. So we did. We stayed there all day, fighting fires all day long.

CC: What was it like when you arrived on the scene? This was dry dock number one?

CT: Yeah. Dry dock number one. And that fire station is just one block below us on our fire station.

CC: What was it like when you got there?

CT: Oh, gee, that's just . . . there was two destroyers [*CASSIN & DOWNES*] that were completely in blaze, all burning. And one thing was in our favor, the smoke was going towards the harbor, otherwise we couldn't have fought the fires there. That was one thing that was in our favor.

CC: And on your way to the dry dock, you . . .

CT: Oh, we was getting strafed on the way down to the fire dock, on the way down to the number one dry dock. And that's when one of the strafing bullets hit the fire bell on the truck. It knocked a little chip out of it.

CC: But other than that you . . .

CT: Yeah, there wasn't -- didn't get a scratch, any of us.

CC: And, okay, so you got to the dry dock, the destroyers were engulfed in flames.

CT: Oh yes.

CC: What was happening on the *PENNSYLVANIA*?

CT: Well, they started firing there, and just after we got there, they started firing at these planes, and it was under fire all the time we was down there, because the whole time, they were shooting these planes all the time, right over our heads.

And not only that, these torpedoes -- only two destroyers going off all the time. Just lucky, they were sunk down so low, every time they'd go off, they'd go up and miss us. That's the only thing that saved us too, from those torpedoes blowing up.

CC: Did they float to dry dock?

CT: Yeah, eventually did, yes. But it wasn't flooded when we was fighting fires there at first.

CC: What were you able to accomplish?

CT: Well, we stayed there until all the fires were out. So that's how we got credit for saving that battleship, *Pennsylvania*. So we got the credit. I got the citation from the President of the United States, from [Rear] Admiral Bloch, and from the Lieutenant General Smith, just coming out of the Marine Corps, I got three citations.

CC: Did you have any chance to see what was going on in the rest of the shipyard while you were fighting this fire?

CT: No, I'm telling you, I wasn't conscious of anything else going on. I tell you, when they come over the second raid, though, that was the scariest part of the whole raid. These planes were coming in from towards Diamond Head. And I read that book, they said those, when they come into their second raid, they were meant for the battleship *Pennsylvania*, but that battleship *NEVADA* was trying to make an escape out of the harbor. It was exactly in line from Diamond Head, the battleship *Pennsylvania*, and the *NEVADA*, got aligned in a real line. That's when they changed their minds and decided they'd try to sink the battleship *NEVADA* to try to plug up the harbor out there. Otherwise, those bombs were meant for the *Pennsylvania*. Boy, and I seen those bombs coming down; they dropped right overhead. Then I just said, "Oh my god, I guess this will be the end for me, you know. So I didn't even look any more.

CC: So you just kept doing your job?

CT: Yeah, we just kept doing our job.

CC: And then it was over.

CT: I think if I had it all to do over again, I'd say, "Let's get the hell out of here!" (Laughs)

CC: That's probably the military training.

CT: Yeah, that's right. You get orders. See, we didn't go down on our own. We were ordered to go down there. So you don't do anything on your own. You're ordered to go down there.

CC: Do you remember anything really strange or-- even in the midst of all this, sometimes some humorous things even happen. Anything like that occur to you while all this was going on?

CT: Oh, no. I think, we were just like dummies down there. We were just sitting down there, squirting water on all the ships until we had all the fires out.

CC: Okay. (To Daniel Martinez) You have any questions?

Daniel Martinez: Tell me, what kind of gear did you have on down there? Did you have your fire hat?

CT: Yeah. I had to wear a fire hat, assistant fire chief. All of us had to wear our fire hats, yeah. The fire chief had his, says fire chief on his, mine "assistant fire chief" and all of our firemen just had "firemen" on their hats.

DM: Did you have the coats on?

CT: And then we wore a badge too, also.

CC: Did you have the coats?

CT: No. We had coats, but we didn't take them down with us.

CC: Gas masks or any of that?

CT: No, no. Just our -- we just had our fireman hats and khaki uniform.

CC: What about after you were successful in saving the *PENNSYLVANIA*, what kind of . . . did they assign you to other duty, or what happened later?

CT: Well, I had an opportunity to go to an officer school after that, but I met another fireman and we turned it down. So they wanted to send us back to Quantico, Virginia at officer school, but we both turned it down.

CC: But I mean actually like later that night, or the next day, what kind of assignments?

CT: Oh, let me tell you now, that night, now, one of those aircraft -- I think it was the *ENTERPRISE* -- was coming in. They were flying their planes into the harbor there and they opened fire upon our own planes there that night.

CC: And you saw that?

CT: I saw that too. And boy, that was scary too. We had our . . . we took our fire trucks out in the navy yard. We didn't keep them in the fire department any more. And we completely surrounded by machine guns and everything, shooting at all them planes. Boy, we was in no man's land.

CC: Did you know they were our planes?

CT: No. No.

CC: You couldn't tell.

CT: No, I couldn't tell.

CC: So as far as you were concerned, it could've been another attack?

CT: That's right, yeah. No, I didn't know they were our planes.

CC: Was that the mood? I mean, people just didn't know . . . did you hear rumors? What did you think was going to happen next?

CT: Well, they had all kinds of rumors there that they were making landing parties there, different parts of the islands around. Just rumors, you know. So, boy, it was really scary around there for weeks after Pearl Harbor because we were expecting to be invaded any time again.

CC: Didn't like to go out at night.

CT: And what was scary, you know, we saw where our fleets all sunk and all of our air force were all knocked out. Hickam Field is right across from us there. And I saw all the planes all burned up over there, they just strafed them. It was all on fire. That's just right over the fence from us there.

CC: And did you spend . . . how did you spend the rest of the war? Did you stay on this duty or what? Did you . . .

CT: See, I went over in '39; you're supposed to put two years overseas and I was about due to come back to the States again. But I stayed about six more months after Pearl Harbor, and then I went in the fire department at Camp Pendleton, at Oceanside. I was in the fire department right under civil service fire department there. And I was in there, in that fire department for about a year or a little more. And then I went from there into commander of the guard duty at Camp Pendleton until I returned back overseas again. I was in the Fourth Marine Division on Maui when the war ended.

CC: Oh, so you were back on Maui?

CT: Yeah, back on Maui. The Fourth Marine Division.

CC: I understand you guys took over Maui.

CT: Yeah, we was on Maui when the war ended, Fourth Marine Division.

CC: When you look back forty-five years ago and you think about it, how do you feel about all of this, forty-five years later? What do you think about?

CT: Well, I'll tell you, it's sure been -- I know when I came back over here for the first convention over here, I told my wife, "The only thing I recognize here in Honolulu was Aloha Tower and Diamond Head. It's all new city built up here." It wasn't that way the last time I seen Honolulu here, you know. It was all the old city then.

CC: How does it . . . did you . . . did this experience create any long-time animosity against the Japanese?

CT: Not at all. I've been over to Japan, see, several years ago. No, I don't have no animosity towards them at all.

CC: Well, they were doing their jobs.

CT: In fact, I love the Japanese people. When we was over there, they were so nice to us over there.

CC: Do you find it . . .

CT: My son sells Bridgestone tires and he won us a trip over to Japan, my wife and I. And there was forty-nine in our group when we went over there, and boy, we really got the royal trip when we was over there. They are really nice people.

CC: So forty-five years can make a lot of changes?

CT: Yes. You know, I went to Hiroshima on the bullet train and I saw Hiroshima, what was wiped out, but that's also a new city built up again.

CC: What about . . . you mentioned, you told me you wanted to tell me something about your brothers, your whole family actually survived it.

CT: Yes. All six brothers all survived.

CC: Okay, you were all in the service?

CT: Yes. All six brothers. See, I had a brother and I in the Marines and the rest of them were in the . . . let's see, one was in the Air Force and the rest were in the Army.

CC: Were they all in the Pacific, or

CT: No. One brother was in Europe. He went through all the European invasions, clear up to Germany.

CC: Okay. That's all I have (To DM:) Do you have anything else?

Yeah, I want to ask you this. This is something I do want to ask you about here. You have a picture here of one of your buddies from your youth.

CT: Yes. Now . . .

CC: And maybe you can tell me who this picture is and a little bit about it.

CT: All right, let me . . . do you ever go to the *ARIZONA*?

CC: Actually, you want him to hold it, while he's Okay.

CT: His initials are on the *ARIZONA* plaque there, J. R. Lynch. That's my buddy there if you ever see it, in memory.

CC: And you went to school with him? Or tell us about him.

CT: Oh yeah. We went to country church together from babies on up until we was all grown up, and all through high school, all through school together. We were very close buddies.

CC: And he ended up in the Navy, on the *ARIZONA*?

CT: He was on the Arizona and several of them off the *ARIZONA* were going to some kind of specialty school on the battleship Pennsylvania and he was coming up, oh, during the week there, to my fire department. And Friday was the last day I got to see him alive.

CC: And didn't he . . .

CT: And that picture there was taken Sunday before Pearl Harbor.

CC: Didn't you say that . . .

CT: And he's got my picture with him on the *ARIZONA*.

CC: Didn't you say that he had only just gone back on board, or something like that?

CT: Oh, we went back on the Arizona Saturday, the day before Pearl Harbor. If he'd been on the *PENNSYLVANIA*, I think he'd been alive today. And he had his brother over at Pearl Harbor. He was on that destroyer *WARD*, and that is the ship that sunk one of those midget subs out there. And they was the one that sent the alarm in that they had sunk the sub and there was nothing done about it, you know.

CC: Okay.

DM: Tell me, on this picture, you say this picture was taken the Sunday before the attack, where was it taken?

CT: In Honolulu here.

DM: And who took it?

CT: Gee, I don't know, one of these photo shops here. I don't remember which one.

DM: His picture is still with . . . of you, is with him.

CT: Yes.

CC: Okay, so tell that story. The two of you went into town, or . . .

CT: Yeah. That's on Sunday before. See, like I told you, only one of us sergeants could go on liberty each weekend. One of us had to be there at all time. So I took my liberty a week before Pearl Harbor and my day due was on Pearl Harbor day. That's why I was on duty.

CC: So you and your buddy went into town together.

CT: Yeah, on the Sunday before Pearl Harbor.

CC: Tell me how you got these pictures. What did you do?

CT: Oh, we was . . . we took them at some photo shop. I forgot which one it was. And then we'd been off the Waikiki Beach Theater, out there, seen the show that day. And then we took those pictures after we came out of that show.

CC: And then he took yours and you took his.

CT: Yeah. Yeah, he took my picture with him on the *ARIZONA*.

DM: Do you know what his staging on the *ARIZONA* was, his duty stage? Do you know what he did onboard?

CT: He was a seaman, second class.

CC: Okay. We'll get a picture, let me get a picture of this.

CT: And that's his initials there, if you look on the *ARIZONA*, it's J. R. Lynch, his initials on the plaque. Some of my neighbors been over and they got a picture of it.

DM: So he was, had training on the *PENNSYLVANIA*, and he . . .

(Conversation continues off-microphone)

CC: What do you remember most about Lynch?

CT: Well, we were just real old buddies, you know.

DM: Did he have a sense of humor?

CT: Oh yeah.

DM: Was he a quiet guy, or was he the loud one?

CC: You can tell us . . . when we're looking at the picture, we can get his audio when the camera is rolling on the picture. We can ask him.

DM: That would be a great thing.

__: Does he still have his mike on?

DM: No, he took it off.

CC: Put his mike back on, maybe.

__: Okay, sir, could you put . . .

CT: So you can see, I'm a nervous wreck. I get all nervous talking about this.

DM: If we could get a little background . . .

CT: Yeah, I'm a nervous wreck.

(Conversation off-microphone)

CT: Yeah, I told you, I'm not . . .

(Conversation interrupted)

CC: Tommy, tell me about your friend, Robert Lynch. What kind of guy was he?

CT: Well, he was a real happy guy. He was always laughing, he laughs a lot. Him and his brother both, they just laugh, they were always laughing, it seemed like. Very happy people.

CC: What kinds of things did you do together as kids?

CT: Oh, gee, we rode a horse, each one of us always had a -- well, we was like cowboys, out in the country, riding out there. We did a lot of riding around out in the country on our horses around lots.

CC: And where was this?

CT: In Blanket, little old town out in the country.

CC: Blanket, Texas.

CT: Blanket, Texas. It's on the map, but it's in Brown county, Brownwood.

CC: So the two of you were like real close buddies?

CT: Oh yeah. I told you, we went out there . . . their family and our family went to a country church, they call it Rock Church. We was hard shell Baptists, they called us.

CC: So you went off to the see the world together?

CT: Yeah. No, I went in the Marines 1934 and when I got out . . . and when I re-enlisted in the Marines the second time, that's when he went in the Navy, him and his brother.

CC: And you ended up both being stationed in Hawaii?

CT: And they came right over to Pearl Harbor, both of them.

CC: So you guys would get together for liberty or whatever?

CT: Yeah. I only got to make two liberties with him. That was the second time I went on liberty with him, that picture there.

CC: What kinds of things would you do?

CT: We'd always got out to the show out there at Waikiki and then we'd fool around a little on the beach. We'd go swimming on the beach and things like that.

CC: Yeah. When did you learn that he didn't survive?

CT: Oh, I forgot to tell you this. Now, after we had the fires all secured there on the battleship *PENNSYLVANIA* at number one dry docks there, I immediately went aboard there to inquiry about him. See, I knew he was on that battleship *PENNSYLVANIA*. And the officer on the deck told me, "Gee," -- I told him he was off the *ARIZONA*, my buddy was. He said, "Oh, they went back to the *ARIZONA*, yesterday, Saturday," day before the raid.

And then he pointed, he said, "That's the *ARIZONA*," the smoke there, burning over there.

God, well, I could've died right there and then. It was such a shock to me. And I never did know he was dead for the longest, because I knew if he was still alive, he'd be getting in contact with me. He never did get -- his brother, too, would've come over and see me and wanted to know if I ever found out anything. I said, "No." So, boy, it really was a shock for me, I'll tell you.

CC: Okay, how old was he?

CT: Oh, we was about -- let's see, I was twenty-eight, he was about twenty-six, I think, something like that, about twenty-six.

CC: Okay, that's it.

CT: Okay.

CC: That's the end.

CT: I'm still nervous.

END OF INTERVIEW